

Historic Childs: Tillman family has been dedicated stewards of Village Inn

Posted 13 March 2021 at 6:45 pm

Restaurant has been mainstay in hamlet for two centuries



By Doug Farley, Cobblestone Museum Director

The genesis of the Tillman family's involvement in the Hamlet of Childs dates back to the early 1950s.

Before that, Sam Tillman and his son, William, were living and working in Rochester. Sam had a successful career with Kodak at the time, and William was finishing up a tour of duty with the Army Air Corps.

Like any good father, Sam wanted to help his son get established with a meaningful career. The duo decided to investigate the prospect of buying a bar. They traveled along the Ridge Road leaving Rochester and stopped at the Country Kitchen, near Kirby's Farm Market. The two decided that the restaurant was not in their price range.

The Tillman duo then came to Childs, and pulled into the old stagecoach stop, known then as the Fairhaven Inn. The building (seen above) had not been well cared for, but still had a small clientele including a fresh produce operation with sales from the front porch.

The owner, Carrie Welch, set a price of \$5,000 for the business. Sam told his son that he would invest \$2,500 if Bill could come up with the remainder. Bill didn't have ready access to the funds, but he knew his wife, Lynn, did. Lynn's father, Mike Elinski, had been a prominent blacksmith in Rochester and had amassed a good deal of money prior to his retirement. At the time, Lynn, herself, was already a successful model who trained with Barbizon in New York City and then worked for Sibley's in Rochester.



Lynn agreed to front the purchase money needed as long as she could be made a full partner. So, the partnership of Sam Tillman and his wife Mary, and Sam's son Bill and his wife Lynn, purchased the Fairhaven Inn in 1952 and shortly thereafter opened the Village Inn (seen above.) This began a lifelong family business relationship that has stretched 70 years, and with the addition of Bill and Lynn's children, Tom and Mark, has continued the life of the historic stagecoach stop for almost 200 years.

Mark's mother Lynn, in addition to working as a model for Sibley's in Rochester, soon began work as a bartender at the Village Inn. Mark said, "That was the arrangement until my mother's boss from Sibley's happened into the establishment and saw her tending bar. He fired her on the spot because no one working for Sibley's was going to be seen tending bar."

Then, with the income from the restaurant providing the family's sole support, it became imperative that the business needed to quickly become successful. One only need look at what the restaurant has become today to realize that the Tillman family's years of hard work has created a fine dining establishment, unparalleled in the region.

"The \$2,500 my mother used to buy the restaurant was the best investment she ever made," Mark said. He explained that he and his brother, Tom, bought out their parents in 1982, and agreed to provide a lifetime income for both parents, setting them up to enjoy their retirement for almost four decades until Bill's death in 2017 and Lynn's in 2020.

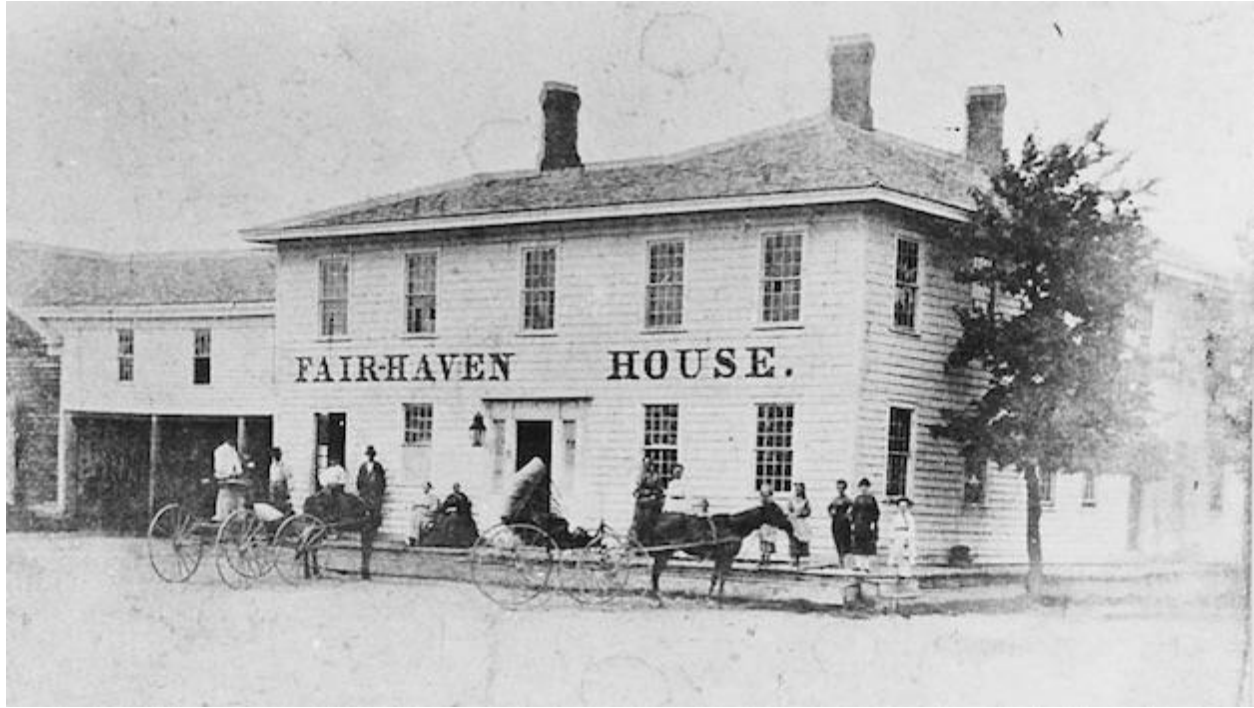
Mark Tillman, born in 1956, remembers literally growing up in Tillman's Historic Village Inn. Bill, Lynn, and children Tom and Mark lived in the upstairs rooms above the old bar. There were originally five small guest rooms and several rooms for the Tillman family. Mark recalled having the run of the establishment as a child, and played with his brother in the old dance hall above the restaurant.

The dance hall was a large unfinished room that sports open beams and supporting cables that were added in the 20th century to pull the leaning walls back into shape. Mark's childhood bedroom still sports the crayon marks he made on the wallpaper. "Boy, did I get a whooping for that!" he said. Today the room, under lock and key, is used for liquor storage, so Mark said, "It's still my room."



Mark offered, “My parents worked hard, but they played hard, too.” Mark recalls that his parents took many trips to exotic destinations. “They left me and Tom with the restaurant’s cook or bartender for a few weeks every year.” He described one such trip in 1958, seen above, where his parents (left) and grandparents (right) travelled by car, cross-country, into Mexico, ending their road trip at Acapulco where they enjoyed fishing and all the resort had to offer. “This was a day and age before interstate highways!” Mark reflected.

Later, continuing their tradition of vacation junkets, Mark said his parents traveled to Naples, Italy in 1974 to visit him when he was stationed there in the military.



The original Fairhaven House (seen above around 1860) got started in 1824 and went through a series of owners and expansions over the years.



This later view from about 1900 shows the addition of a two story porch, a much larger tree on the east side, and a name change to Fairhaven Hotel.



At some point in the early days, Bill Tillman acquired and stored the original bar from the Fairhaven Inn in his barn. Mark (seen here) recently moved the 20-foot cherry bar into the newest room at the restaurant, an 1,800 square foot addition, that was added in 2014.



The original bar is an amazing piece of finely crafted furniture. Mark believes that at one time the bar probably sported brass eagles to complement carvings in the wood itself.



The Tillman family made a series of additions to the restaurant including what they call The Main Dining Room with its beautiful stone fireplace. Mark said the fireplace cost \$500 at that time it was built.



A later addition utilized the site's original carriage house to become "The Carriage Room," with its large wall of glass facing Ridge Road which replaced the old barn doors. The carriage house at one time had stalls for 13 carriages and horses. Mark uses this large dining room to display photos and artifacts from the restaurant's storied past. With the most recent addition to the north-end of The Carriage Room, the seating capacity of the restaurant grew to 400 people.

Mark reflected on his life at Tillman's and said, "It's been an amazing life. I got started as a kid by washing dishes."

Mark got more involved with the restaurant following his tour of duty with the Marine Corps. "My dad told me and my brother we had to learn the ropes, so I worked a year each as cook, bartender, and host," Mark said. "I trained under our cook at the time, Joyce Mack, in 1974. She worked me so hard, I just about quit! Even the Marine Corps was easier!"

Mark described working with family as "the best of times and the worst of times." After Tom and Mark bought out their parents in 1982, they divided up the duties so the two wouldn't "bump heads." Tom supervised the bar and kitchen and Mark handled the dining room,

hiring staff, and bookkeeping. Mark and Tom worked together to make annual changes to the menu and other tasks that needed mutual agreement.

Tom decided to retire from daily operations in 2009, but continues as a joint owner with his brother. Mark said, "I'm going to be 65 years old this year. This has been a labor of love, but there has to be an end in sight. I've always said I hope I can make it until the restaurant's 200th anniversary in 2024."

Other extended Tillman family members have been involved throughout the years as well. Mark said, "My wife Susyn worked with me in the restaurant for five weeks as a hostess. After that, we both knew we couldn't continue with that and maintain a happy marriage."

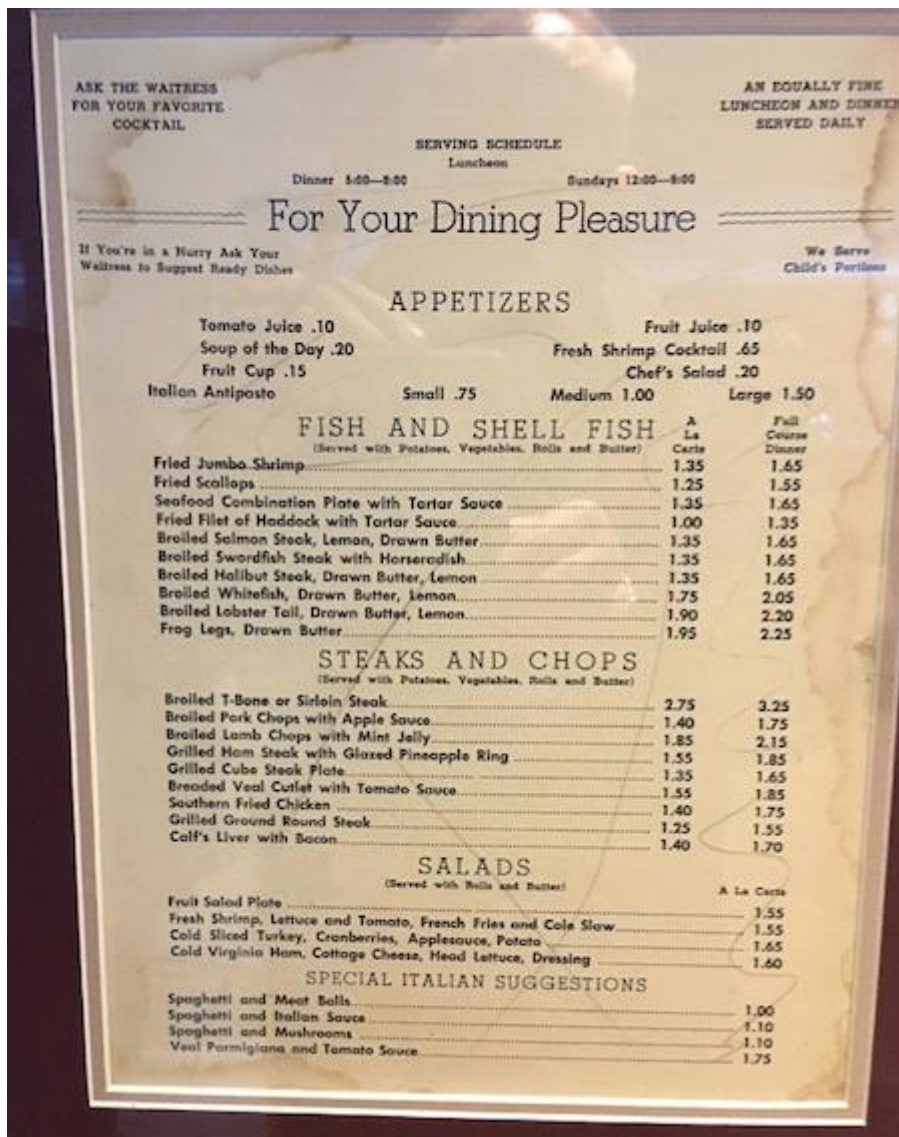


Susyn elected instead to pursue her mental health counseling business, "All About You," and opened an office in the Village Inn. She also has separate facilities in Brockport and Batavia. Mark and Susyn's daughter Samantha is currently working at the restaurant as a manager alongside Victoria Mortensen.



Mark proudly displays a small portion of his family's bottle collection that goes back to the earliest days of the restaurant.

"At one point, we had over 2,000 bottles," Mark said. "Whenever a new collector's edition bottle became available, my father and grandfather would buy it, pour the contents into a decanter and add the collector's edition to the growing bottle collection. When my Dad passed away, I offered the bottles to family and friends with the stipulation that they had to display the bottles, not sell them."



When asked about the restaurant's signature dish, prime rib, Mark responded, "Prime rib has not always been on the menu." (Original menu shown here.) "Our cook in the 1960s, Bertha Beam, asked if she could try cooking prime rib for a Sunday special."

The item was such a huge hit that it was extended, first to a special every Sunday, and eventually available every day.

"Our prime rib supplier is Kip Palmer from Palmer's Food Service, a business that was started in the 1850s," Mark said. "Kip and my grandfather became good friends. We are their oldest customer."

Mark recalled that a few years back he attempted to estimate how many pounds of prime rib the Village Inn has served. In the course of doing so, Palmer's offered to give him an exact

accounting from their records. As of three years ago, the Village Inn has served 3,500,000 pounds or 1,750 tons of prime rib.

Mark Tillman wanted to be sure to acknowledge that the success of the Village Inn is not just about the Tillman family. Many others have worked hard to create the Village Inn today. He said, "This has been a labor of love, and I'm looking forward to whatever is next."